Mis-representations of Tibet in the West and in China:Seven Years in Tibet versus Red River Valley

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Introduction

I am going to be taking a look at contemporary visual representations of Tibet and Tibetans in the context of two films: one Chinese film we will call "*Red River Valley*" and a famous Franco-american film, *Seven Years in Tibet*. The main point here is to demonstrate how two different ideologies can produce very similar discourses and maintain lack of understanding by avoiding debate and supporting orientalist mis-representations of the Other.

So I will begin by giving you a brief introduction to the films; then I will go on to highlight some interesting common points and discuss in more depth the implications of such similarities. Finally, I will draw conclusions that we will have plenty of time left over to discuss at the end.

Seven Years in Tibet and *Red River Valley*

I will start off by introducing you those films, giving you a summary and a quick overview of the general context in which those films were produced and released.

Seven Years in Tibet was released in 1997, directed by French Jean-Jacques Annaud and starring mostly American actors such as Brad Pitt. The film is based on the book of the same title by Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer who took refuge in Tibet after being imprisoned by the British[1]. Harrer remained in Lhasa for about 6 years until the Communist invasion in 1950-1951, and the film chiefly centers around Harrer's change from an arrogant, selfish man to one very much enlightened by Tibetan culture. He

[1] First published in 1953. Heinrich Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet*, Tarcher, 1997.

becomes a close friend of the young Dalai Lama and becomes his tutor. He is forced to leave Tibet in 1950 after the Chinese Army enters Lhasa.

In Europe, growth of interest in Tibet since the end of the 18th century led to what has been called "tibétophilie européenne" or European Tibetophilia[2]. Tibetan religion and beliefs were also very popular in the New Age Movement that emerged in the 19th century and took on a new life in the 1960-1970s[3]. This film was released while "Tibet fever" was reaching its highest point in the US. In the late 1990s, American studios produced several films about Tibet, such as *Kundun*, *Windhorse;* in the mean time, such films as *Red Corner* described China as a fierce and rude country. Sympathy for Tibet and Tibetans was expressed in "Concerts for a Free Tibet", books on Tibet, Hollywood stars converting to Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist centers in the US etc[4].

However, "Tibet fever" is much more than a cultural movement: it is also the result of an internationalization strategy of the Dalai Lama, and it clearly has political effects on the relationship between the US and China. In this context, *Seven Years in Tibet* was, among other events, emblematic of growing popular support for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in a peculiar political context that should not be forbidden[5].

As the Chinese invasion is depicted with harsh images of a violent Chinese Army, I hardly need to tell you that the film, for its brutal and impolite image of the Chinese Communist Party, was condemned and forbidden in China.

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[2] Kaschewsky gives a useful and well-documented overview of Tibet's representation in the West from ancient Greece to the 18th century. See Rudolf Kaschewsky, "The Image of Tibet in the West before the Nineteenth Century", in T. Dodin and H. Räther (ed), *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 2001, pp.3-20

[3] See Frank J. Korom, "Old Age Tibet New Age America", in F. Korom (ed.), *Constructing Tibetan Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Quebec, World Heritage Press, 1997, pp.73-97. See also

[4] See Barry Sautman, "The Tibet issue in post-summit Sino-American relations", *Pacific Affairs*, 72: 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 7-21.

[5] See Sautman, 1999; Barnett, 2001; and Richard Kraus et Wan Jihong, « Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies », *Pacific Affairs*, automne 2002, 75:3, pp.419-434.

Red River Valley (or *A Tale of the Sacred Mountain* or in Chinese: *Honghegu* 红河谷) was released in 1997 in China but was screened in the US only two years later. This film is also based on a book, *Bayonet in Lhasa: The First Full Account of the British Invasion of Tibet in 1904* by a British travel writer, Peter Fleming[6]. It relates to the British military action led in Tibet by the soldier-explorer Francis Younghusband. In the film, a young Tibetan rescues Younghusband from an avalanche and welcomes him as a member of his family, treating his wounds and nursing him. There in Tibet, the British soldier found serenity among "pure" and friendly Tibetans. Meanwhile, the same Tibetan family takes care and adopts a Han girl who escaped from a religious sacrifice. She and the Tibetan young man fall in love in spite of the local Tibetan princess's attempt to seduce the young Tibetan. When completely recovered, Younghusband leaves Tibet but comes back again as a reporter. He witnesses, horrified and grieved, the cruel and bloody British invasion of Tibet. The Han girl dies, trying to protect her beloved Tibetan.

Tibet drew attention of numerous Chinese intellectuals and cultural producers in the 1980-1990s. Writers, painters, singers and even politicians made Tibet very popular through their works and policies[7]. This appeal of the Tibetan people was involved in different intellectual movements in a post-cultural revolution context, and was definitely imbued with search for spiritualism as well as exoticism and 'Otherness'[8]. In this context*, Red River Valley* appealed

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[6] First published in 1961. Peter Fleming, *Bayonet in Lhasa: The First Full Account of the British Invasion of Tibet in 1904*, London, Hart Davis, 1961.

[7] Zhaxi Dawa is a famous half-Han half-Tibetan contemporary writer. Among his work, see ZHAXI Dawa 扎西达娃, *Fengma zhi yao* 风马之耀 (Dazzling of Wind Horses), Beijing, Beijing wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1991; or *Xizang, yinmi suiyue* 西藏，隐秘岁月 (Hidden years of Tibet), Hubei Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1992. Tibet is very present in Ba Huang 巴荒 works: see his book *Temptations of Sunshine and Wilderness–Ba Huang*, Sichuan Art Publishing House, 1994. Tibet has been popularized by Nima Zeren's 尼玛泽仁 paintings too. The singer Zheng Jun 郑钧 became popular with his album "Return to Lhasa" and, Dadawa's "Sister Drum" 阿姐鼓 shipped over a million copies in China, exploiting Tibetan culture and music. On the latter, see Janet Upton's article: "The Politics and Poetics of *Sister Drum*: 'Tibetan' Music in the Global Marketplace", in Tim Craig and Richard King (Ded.), *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 2001, pp.99-119.

[8] On cultural and intellectual movements in China from the 1970s to 1989, see Chen Fong-ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy, The Chinese Popular Culture Movement and Political Transformations, 1979-1989,* Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1997. See also Mitra Sabaree, "Comeback of Hundred Flowers in Chinese Literature",

to filmgoers through images of visual grandeur of Tibet, a love story between a Han girl and a Tibetan young man and an exotic blond-haired British soldier. Meanwhile, the 1990s witnessed an outstanding growth in entertainment-focused cultural products in China[9]. Therefore, several market-oriented reforms were undertaken to boost the film industry. In the late 1990s, state-industry collaboration was established by the Party and tried to create a more attractive form of propaganda through combining political authority and market forces: the so-called "major melody film" (*zhu xuanlu pian* 主旋律片). In 1997, other propaganda films or "major melody films" were released, such as *Liu Hulan* (刘胡兰 *Liu Hulan* by Shan Yaoting)*, The Great Turn Around* (大转折上集 *Dazhuangzhe shang ji* by Wei Lian) or *The Opium War* (鸦片战争 *yapian zhanzheng* by Xie Jin).

Directed by Feng Xiaoning, this film is the first of a trilogy called "War and Peace" that tells historical events through foreigners' lenses[10]. It was intentionally released in the same year as China's recovery of Hong Kong and is very much a celebration of Chinese solidarity with the return of Hong Kong. Promoted by the Chinese central government and largely relayed by state-run mass media, the film won numerous prizes at China's main award ceremonies, and served as the inaugural film of the 22nd Singaporean "Speak Mandarin Campaign" (讲华语运动 *Jiang huayu yundong*) in 2000[11]. *Red River Valley* is thus definitely connected to a context of government's ideological

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in Tan Chung (ed.), *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 1998.

[9] For an account on Chinese film industry after the 1980s, see Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*, Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2005; Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, Londres, Routledge, 2004; Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006; Hao Xiaoming et Chen Y., « Film and Social Change: The Chinese Cinema in the Reform Era », *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 2000, 28:1, pp.36-45. See also an *History of the Chinese Film Industry*, by the Australian Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, available online on the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Website: http://www.dfat.gov.au

[10] The second entry of Feng Xiaoning's trilogy in 1999, *Grief of the Yellow River* (*Huanghe juelian* 黄河绝恋), deals with a grounded American pilot in the WW2 who is rescued by Chinese, and falls in love with a Chinese girl soldier fighting Japanese. The third film, released in 2001 (Purple Sunset- *ziri* 紫日), pays tribute to crossing borders friendship through the story of a Chinese prisoner, a Japanese officer and a Russian soldier who survived a big battle in 1945.

[11] This campaign encourages young Singaporeans to speak Mandarin as a common language instead of dialects. First launched in 1979 by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, it is a year-round campaign including Mandarin handbooks, CD-Rom, music, films… See Lee Kuan Yew *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, Harpercollins, 2000.

hardening and a renewed and necessary enthusiasm for big commercial production.

What should be underlined in this short introduction is the importance of the economic, political and cultural context in which films are produced. Indeed, images of the 'Other' are received and perceived historically and rely upon larger discourses.

Representations of Tibet and Tibetans

Moving onto representations of Tibet and Tibetans, let me expand on some similar strategies of representations employed in both films. I use the term 'strategies' on purpose: modern representational practices produce knowledge, and representations establish control through knowledge formation[12].

Harrer in *Seven Years in Tibet* and Younghusband in *Red River Valley* narrate the stories from their point of view in the major part of the films. In both cases, the main character (and narrator) is not Tibetan. The voice-over of the narrators creates a storytelling effect: it stresses the recording of observed facts, what is supposed to be an account of roughly 'true-life'[13]. However, representations of Tibet based on so-called 'authenticity' and 'objective reality' hide asymmetrical relations of domination[14]. Described as 'innocent', 'childish' and as a matter of fact 'ignorant', Tibetans are represented backward, not to say savage. This supposed backwardness is shown as essential to Tibetans and to their relationship with Westerners and Han.

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[12] See Michel Foucault's theories on Power and Knowledge, *Power/Knowledge*, Colin Gordon,1980. See also *L'ordre du discours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.
[13] On cinematic methods of narrative, see Laurent Jullier, *L'analyse de séquences*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2000; and *Le son au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006.
[14] Dibyesh Anand analyses Western colonial and neo-colonial discourses on Tibet and underlines asymmetrical power relations that remains not only in popular Western imagining but also among scholars. See Dibyesh Anand, "Western Colonial Representations of the Other: The Case of Exotica Tibet"*, New Political Science*, March 2007, 29:1, pp.23-42.

Refined and learned Western men contrast with Tibetan children, childish women, strong but simplistic Tibetan men. Their relationship, thus, is not well balanced. Harrer (Brad Pitt) becomes the tutor of the young Dalai Lama on the one hand, teaching him what the world looks like[15]. On the other hand, Younghusband also introduces his new Tibetan friends to Western technology: the young Tibetan princess plays with Younghusband's binoculars, jumping back when she naively thinks the yak is so big that it is rushing up to her.

Of course, films do not say that Westerners have nothing to learn from Tibetans. The two stories are about Harrer and Younghusband's spiritual transformations thanks to their experience in Tibet. This experience is thus a transition Harrer and Younghusband actually benefit from. Unlike them, Tibetans are not intended to better their position: in the end, they get nothing good out of encounters with non-Tibetans (Chinese in *Seven Years in Tibet*, British in *Red River Valley*). Therefore, the Westerner is the dominant, the one who possesses and shares knowledge with the 'Other', and produces knowledge of the 'Other'. Western heroes tell Tibetans, but Tibetans do not tell them in return in the films, and remain subjected by the narrators.

Paradoxically, knowledge of the 'Other' is marked by the impossibility of really "knowing" the 'Other': Tibetans are always considered as mysterious, essentially 'different' and unfathomable. Something is always separating Tibetans from Han and Westerners. Harrer expresses his fascination for a mysterious and definitely impenetrable world, as well as Younghusband's character who described Tibetans as having *"….something we have long lost, that's pure innocence".* Being a transition in their lives, Tibet remains a dream, a lost paradise, a fantasy shared by Chinese and Westerners. Consequently, Tibetans have to be preserved and protected from realities of the outside world, for the dream not to turn out into a nightmare. This fantasy of a

[15] In some parts of the film, Harrer also explains the young Dalai Lama what an elevator is, and helps him building a 'movie house' or theatre. Harrer is also able to repair an old radio, making Tibetans so happy that they immediately begin dancing.

dreamlike Tibet excludes it from the real world and denies Tibetans their history as well as their power to influence their own situation[16].

To digress for a moment, let me consider the extremely interesting use of a Western protagonist in the Chinese film. Younghusband fascination for "pure" and "innocent" Tibetans is neither criticized nor condemned by the film producers. On the contrary, it seems to underline Younghusband's deep knowledge and understanding of the Tibetan people, in contrast to British soldiers who later come to invade Tibet. Indeed, he is the only one who tries to prevent the British army from invading Tibet and is very affected by the massacre he witnesses. Orientalist perceptions do not harm main characters but highlight them. Besides, this orientalist discourse on Tibetans does not directly compromise Chinese themselves although it is exactly similar to the dominant Chinese discourse on Tibet[17].

Let's turn now to an important similar feature that has much to do with Tibet political situation.
It goes without saying that the time-period and conflicts related to it (invasion by the British in 1904 and invasion by the Chinese Communists in the 1950s) have been deliberately selected. They obviously relate two different and competing versions of Tibet's history. On the one hand, the Chinese film points out the role of the British Army in what is called a massacre of Tibetans in 1904. The narrative insists on the pretentious intent of the British to "civilize" and "liberate" the Tibetan people. On the other hand, the Chinese Communists invasion is strongly condemned by *Seven Years in Tibet* as it marks the end of a "peaceful" and a "happy" life for Harrer and for the Tibetan people.

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[16] On the political impact of such "dreamlike Tibet", see Jamyang Norbu "Behing the Lost Horizon: Demystifying Tibet", in Dodin and Räther, pp.373-378.
[17] See for instance Thomas Heberer's article on Chinese misperceptions of Tibet: "Old Tibet a Hell on Earth? The Myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese Art and Propaganda", in T. Dodin and H. Räther, pp.111-150. See also Dru Gladney and Louisa Schein on "internal/oriental" orientalism: Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China Reflections on Muslims, Minorities and Other Subaltern Subjects*, London, Hurst and Company, 2004; and Louisa Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China", *Modern China*, Jan.1997, 23:1, pp.69-98.

What is obvious is that both sides try to put the blame on the other, without questioning their own role on Tibet's actual situation. Let's consider *Seven years in Tibet* first. Interestingly, the film differs from the book, notably by making Harrer an anti-Nazi while he in reality joined the Nazi Party before the War. Besides, while in the book Harrer draws reader's attention to a relatively disciplined and tolerant behavior of the Chinese troops comparing to the previous 1910's Chinese invasion, the film depicts the Chinese invasion as extremely violent and pitiless. On the other hand, *Red River Valley* ends with a really violent and bloody fight between the British army and Tibetan people assisted by Han. The Han girl who went back to her Han family and disappeared from the film for about 20 minutes suddenly appears from nowhere with her brother and Han friends to help Tibetans resisting British invaders. She becomes a Chinese Han martyr when she dies to protect her beloved Tibetan young man from a British soldier.

This process conceals any consideration for a shared responsibility. Tibet is always represented as a remote place, virgin and untouched by outside world. *Red River Valley* describes what seems to be the very first invasion of Tibet, omitting previous foreign incursions, notably Chinese incursions. Moreover, the British are blamed for being arrogant and pretending to educate Tibetan people, although Chinese used the same arguments to impose Communism in Tibet in 1950. Besides, involving Westerners and modernity in violation of Tibet exonerates the Chinese state as a perpetrator of abuse. At the same time, *Seven Years in Tibet* does not bring up the previous British invasion and focuses on Chinese invasion only, pretending that Tibet was a virgin territory intact until the arrival of the Chinese Army. All in all, these films depict very dark historical reconstructions without any nuance, turning them out to their advantage. Through this process, both Chinese and Western treat Tibetan "as objects in stories of heroic achievement by outsiders, or as victims of abuse incapable of agency"[18].

[18] Barnett (2001), p.272.

Conclusion

I have identified some significant rhetorical strategies that characterize Western and Chinese representations of the Tibetan people. These two collective imaginings support two different not to say opposite ideologies: Chinese representing itself as a unified state and a big family including "Tibetan brothers"; Westerners defending what they perceive as "real authentic independent" Tibetan culture. However, what I am suggesting is that Chinese propaganda film and Hollywood's film both promote similar orientalist perceptions of Tibetan. Therefore, practices of essentializing and stereotyping characters provide the backbone to put flesh to the imagined Tibetan. Meanwhile, a Knowledge/Power relationship is established that conceals social, political, economic and even ecological situation experienced by Tibetans. Moreover, these films contribute to construct two distinct collective imaginaries of Tibet and Tibetan, but very similar in their processes and functions.

This analysis thus illustrates the Tibet issue is not a real political *debate* but more an "attempt to achieve political effects by engaging people in shared image or representation"[19]. Tibetan people are disempowered by such approaches that sustain a myth that prevent from seeing the Tibet issue as a serious political conflict involved in a global and complex context.

[19] Robert Barnett, "Violated Specialness: Western Political Representations of Tibet", in T. Dodin and H. Räther, 2001, p.279.